

PATENT APPLICATION
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**METHOD AND SYSTEM FOR SHARING VIDEO
WITH ADVERTISEMENTS OVER A NETWORK**

CROSS-REFERENCE TO RELATED CASE

This application is based on and claims priority to and the benefit of Provisional U.S. Patent Application Serial No. 60/147,029, filed on August 3, 1999, the entirety of which is hereby incorporated herein by reference. This application is a continuation-in-part of U.S. Patent Application Serial No. 09/497,587, filed February 3, 2000, the entirety of which is hereby
5 incorporated herein by reference.

TECHNICAL FIELD

This invention relates generally to the distribution of video segments. More particularly,
10 the invention relates to sharing in streaming video format over a network a video to which an advertisement selected by the sender of the video has been attached.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

A video can be sent over a computer network as a file attachment to an electronic mail (e-
15 mail) message. With this type of transmission, the entire video file must be transmitted and received before the receiver can view the video. For large files, the time required to complete such transmissions can be longer than the actual playing time of the video. Also, this type of transmission typically requires multiple computer programs to perform all of the necessary functions, including an e-mail application program to send or receive the video in computer file

form, and a second program to play or display the video from the received file attachment. With this type of transmission, it is difficult to control the delivery time of the video, and it is difficult to share or forward the received video.

A video can be posted to a World Wide Web ("Web") page. In order to provide a video in this manner, a server computer connected to the Web must be used to host the Web site, and software packages must exist and be used to prepare the video, and transmit it over the Web using the File Transfer Protocol (FTP or ftp) or the HyperText Transfer Protocol (HTTP or http). To implement this type of video posting, at least a detailed knowledge of various computer communication protocols is required.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

It is an object of this invention to provide methods and systems for sharing video segments over a network, to which video segments a sender of a video segment can attach an advertisement of the sender's choosing. The video segment and associated advertisement can then be streamed over the network, for example the Internet, to a receiving computer such that a person at the receiving computer can view the video segment and the associated advertisement.

In accordance with the present invention, full motion video can be automatically uploaded to a video server and can then be associated with an advertisement selected by the sender of the video. The video and associated advertisement can be accessed by any number of viewers after each viewer has been provided with an identifier of the video. The video identifier can in general be an identification tag which identifies where and/or how the video can be accessed, for example a network address, or a universal resource locator ("URL"). The video can

also be identified with an image that represents the content or subject matter of the video, so that the video can readily be identified when held in a collection of videos. Such identifiers as file names that are useful in a computer file processing, storage and retrieval system can further identify the video.

5 In one aspect, the invention features a method of sending a video segment and an associated advertisement over a computer network. The method includes (a) acquiring a video segment at a computer system, (b) acquiring one or more advertisements at the computer system, (c) offering to a sender an opportunity to indicate a selection of an advertisement of the one or more advertisements to be associated with the video segment, and (d) accepting from the sender the indication of a selection of the advertisement to be associated with the video segment, the video segment and the advertisement to be sent over the computer network. The method further includes, in response to the indication accepted in step (d), automatically at the computer system assuring that the video segment is in a streaming video format, creating an identifier for the video segment, associating the video segment and the advertisement, and sending the video segment, the identifier, and the associated advertisement over the computer network to a receiving computer system.

10 In one embodiment, the step of offering to a sender an opportunity to indicate a selection of an advertisement of the one or more advertisements includes a criterion selectable by the sender. The criterion can be one of a subject of the advertisement, a length of the advertisement, and a
20 remuneration paid for selecting the advertisement. The criterion can include affirmatively leaving the selection to the determination of the server computer system.

In one embodiment, the step of offering to a sender an opportunity to indicate a selection of an advertisement of the one or more advertisements can include a default selection to be made if the sender fails to indicate a selection. The default selection can include a substantially randomized selection of an advertisement.

5 In another aspect, the invention relates to a method of sending a video segment and an associated advertisement over a computer network. The method includes (a) uploading a video segment from a sender computer system to a server computer system, (b) selecting, using the sender computer system, an advertisement stored at the server computer system, and (c) transmitting from the sender computer an indication of an intent to send the video segment and the advertisement over the computer network, the indication causing the server computer system automatically to assure that the video segment is in a streaming video format, to create an identifier for the video segment, to associate the video segment and the advertisement, and to send the video segment, the identifier, and the associated advertisement over the computer network to a receiving computer system.

10 In one embodiment, selecting an advertisement can include selecting an advertisement using a criterion chosen by an operator of the sender computer system. The criterion can be one of a subject of the advertisement, a length of the advertisement, and a remuneration paid for selecting the advertisement. The criterion can include leaving the selection to the determination of the server computer system. The selection can include a substantially randomized selection of an advertisement. The selection can be based on a price paid by an advertiser.

20 In one aspect the invention involves a system for sending a video and an associated advertisement over a computer network. The system includes a first computer system for

connection to other computer systems over a computer network. The first computer system includes a first module operating on the first computer system for acquiring a video segment, a second module operating on the first computer system for generating an identifier associated with the video segment, a third module operating on the first computer system for accepting an indication of intent to send the video segment to another computer, a fourth module operating on the first computer system for automatically sending the video segment and the identifier over the computer network to a receiving computer, and a fifth module operating on the first computer system for accepting from a sender an indication of an advertisement to be associated with the video segment and for transmitting the indication to another computer. The system also includes a second computer system comprising storage and for connection to other computer systems over the computer network. The second computer system includes a sixth module operating on the second computer system for automatically receiving the video segment and its associated identifier sent by the first computer system over the computer network, a seventh module operating on the second computer system for storing an advertisement, an eighth module operating on the second computer system for associating the advertisement with the video segment, a ninth module operating on the second computer system for storing the video segment and associated identifier in the storage, a tenth module operating on the second computer system for receiving an indication to associate the stored video segment and the advertisement, an eleventh module operating on the second computer system for automatically assuring that the video segment is in a streaming video format, and a twelfth module operating on the second computer system for sending the video segment, the identifier, and the associated advertisement from the storage to a receiver computer system.

In one embodiment, the system further includes a thirteenth module operating on the second computer system for determining a price to be charged for one or more of storing the advertisement, associating the advertisement with the video segment, and sending the video segment, the identifier, and the associated advertisement from the storage to the receiver
5 computer system. In one embodiment, the module can determine the price based on a number of transmissions of the video and the associated advertisement multiplied by a rate of charge per transmission. The rate of charge can be based on one of a type of video, a length of the video, and a quality of the video. In another embodiment, the module can determine the price based on a fixed price. Alternatively, the module can determine the price based on a percentage of a sales amount incurred in response to the advertisement.

In one embodiment, the system further includes a module operating on the second computer system for obtaining from a user of the first computer an indication of which advertisement is to be associated with the video sent by the first computer. The module for obtaining an indication of which advertisement is to be associated with the video can use a criterion for the association. The criterion can be one of a subject of the advertisement, a length of the advertisement, and a remuneration paid for selecting the advertisement. In yet another embodiment, the module for obtaining an indication of which advertisement is to be associated with the video can use a criterion for the association that includes leaving the selection to the determination of the server computer. The selection can include a substantially randomized
20 selection of an advertisement.

In still another embodiment, the system further includes a fourteenth module operating on the second computer system for determining whether an operator of the receiver computer system is present during the presentation of the advertisement.

In a further embodiment, the system further includes a third computer system for connection to other computer systems over a computer network, the third computer system including a fifteenth module operating on the third computer system for determining whether an operator of the receiver computer system is present during the presentation of the advertisement. The fifteenth module for determining whether an operator of the receiver computer system is present during the presentation of the advertisement can include a module that causes the display of the advertisement to pause, and a module that senses if an action is performed by the viewer of the advertisement. The module that senses if an action is performed by the viewer of the advertisement can sense one of a button activation, a switch activation, an activation of a pointing device, a response to a prompt, and a physical response of the viewer. The prompt can be in the form of a question. The physical response of the viewer can be one of a voluntary action and a physiological response.

In a still further embodiment, the system further includes a module that determines what events will transpire in response to the action by the viewer. The module that determines what events will transpire in response to the action by the viewer can cause the commencement or resumption, as appropriate, of the display of one of the advertisement and the video segment; it can cause one of the advertisement and the video segment to terminate; and it can cause a predetermined response to occur if the viewer fails to take action within a predefined time interval.

In yet another embodiment, the system further includes a module that reports one of the action of the viewer and the time of the action to the second computer.

In a still further embodiment, the system further includes a sixteenth module operating on the second computer system for determining a payment to be made to one of a sender of an advertisement associated with a video segment and a viewer of the advertisement.

The foregoing and other objects, aspects, features, and advantages of the invention will become more apparent from the following description and from the claims.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

The objects and features of the invention can be better understood with reference to the drawings described below. The drawings are not necessarily to scale, emphasis instead generally being placed upon illustrating the principles of the invention.

5 FIG. 1A is a schematic embodiment of a process and system for obtaining a video segment, uploading the video segment to a server, and sending the video segment to a recipient, according to the invention.

FIG. 1B is a schematic diagram of a process and system for selecting and associating an advertisement to the video which is obtained, uploaded, and sent to a recipient as in FIG. 1A, according to the invention.

FIG. 2 is an embodiment of a system according to the invention, including the interactions and interrelationships within the system.

FIG. 3A is a functional block and flow diagram of an embodiment of the invention.

FIG. 3B is another functional block and flow diagram of an embodiment of the invention, showing from the sender's perspective the steps in associating a video with an advertisement.

FIG. 3C is another functional block and flow diagram of an embodiment of the invention, showing from the host computer's perspective the steps in associating a video with an advertisement.

FIG. 4 is a login screen on a user's computer, in one embodiment of the invention.

20 FIG. 5 is a record/playback screen as seen by the user, in accordance with an embodiment of the invention.

FIG. 6A is a flow diagram of an embodiment of the invention in which software automates a number of steps in connection with the uploading of a video segment.

FIG. 6B is a flow diagram of another embodiment of the invention in which software automates a number of steps in connection with the uploading of a video segment.

5 FIG. 6C is a flow diagram of an embodiment of the invention in which software automates a number of steps in connection with the formatting of a video segment.

FIG. 6D shows the relationship of some of the files created in the flow diagram of FIG. 6C.

FIG. 6E is a flow diagram of a method by which an optimally formatted video segment is sent to a user according to the invention.

FIG. 7 is a screen as seen by the user, the screen indicating that file processing is occurring.

FIG. 8 is an interactive screen used to determine the desires of the individual who sends a video for storage.

FIG. 9 is a video playback screen seen by the user.

FIG. 10 is a screen used by the user to control the status of a video queue.

FIG. 11 is a screen used by the user to control the operational settings of equipment associated with the user's computer.

DESCRIPTION

Referring to FIG. 1, a user of the system, such as a private individual working from home, or a professional working from a business, employs a computer system 10. The computer system

10 can include a computer which can be a personal computer of conventional type such as a desktop or laptop computer, a hand held device such as a PDA, or a more powerful computer such as a workstation, a server, a minicomputer, a mainframe, or the like. The computer system 10 can operate software including a web browser such as Microsoft Internet Explorer or Netscape Navigator or Communicator or the like, for communication over a network such as the Internet via the World Wide Web (hereinafter "the Web"), or to permit wireless communication. The computer system 10 can operate software that can manipulate video segment files. The computer system 10 can communicate with video sources, such a video cameras and video recording machines, if the user wishes to employ such sources. Conventional commercially available personal computers typically have sufficient capability to meet these requirements. The computer system 10 can also employ video segments generated digitally by the computer and appropriate software, or by another computer, if the user wishes to employ such techniques. In one embodiment, the computer system 10 operates a software package called VideoShare Producer 20, which will be described and explained in more detail below.

The VideoShare Producer 20 is a software application package that the user can download from the Web site www.VideoShare.com 50 or that the user can obtain in other formats such as on a CD-ROM or bundled with other software or hardware. The VideoShare Producer 20 software can be operated by the user under his control on his computer, in the computer system 10, in order to provide the capability of recording, converting, and optionally, compressing video segments, creating one or more identifiers for a video segment, and transmitting a video segment with one or more of the identifiers to a host computer 60 operating

under the control of a host such as www.VideoShare.com 50 for storage at a location under the control of the host computer 60. The host computer 60 will be described further below.

An indicator from a user of a system and/or method according to the invention of an intent to send the video segment over the computer network is accepted and, in response to the indication, the video segment is automatically sent as a machine-readable file together with its associated identifier over the computer network to a receiving computer, thereby allowing the sent video segment and its associated identifier to be stored at the direction of the receiving computer and thereafter streamed out over the network.

The computer in the computer system 10 of the user one can be connected to one or more kinds of equipment for generating video segments, such as a video camera such as a Web cam 12 or another type of video camera such as a professional quality video camera. The computer in the computer system 10 of the user can be connected to one or more kinds of equipment for providing prerecorded video segments, such as a video recorder 14, or another computer that can create digital video segments through the use of suitable software, such as for example digital video segments that have been created for various commercial films, or the like. Once the user has obtained a video segment, and has manipulated it according to the procedures described below with regard to the operation of the VideoShare software package, or its equivalent, the video segment with one or more identifiers is transmitted to the host computer 60.

The host computer 60 includes one or more server computers 62, 62', 62'' that communicate via a network such as the Web with other computers, such as the computer in the user's computer system 10. The one or more server computers 62, 62', 62'' also communicate with a storage array 64, or optionally with a plurality of storage arrays substantially similar to

storage array 64. The storage array 64 can be any convenient storage system, such as a redundant array of magnetic storage disks, one or more readable and writeable CD-ROMs, random access semiconductor memory, any combination of such storage devices, or the like. In one embodiment, the host computer 60 operates the www.VideoShare.com 50 Web site, and provides a video hosting service to one or more users. The host computer 60 can connect via the Web and the web site www.VideoShare.com 50 to one or more computers that comprise the Web, conceptually denoted by the box 70, which, while not a part of the www.VideoShare.com 50 Web site, appears to be transparent to users of the www.VideoShare.com 50 Web site, as well as to viewers of video segments that are being hosted by the host computer 60.

Viewers, or individuals who desire, or are invited, to view video segments hosted on the host computer 60, can access video segments hosted on the host computer 60. As will be described in more detail below, in one embodiment, video segments can be hosted on host computer 60 in areas that are open to the public, or can be hosted in other areas that are open only to viewers who have the appropriate permission or authorization to view a specific video segment. A hosted video segment that is stored and controlled by the host computer 60 may be delivered to and displayed for a viewer in a variety of formats, and through a variety of methods, as denoted generally by the box 80. In different embodiments, a video segment can be displayed as: a video greeting card 81, such as a person wishing another a happy birthday; as video email 82, as video that can be viewed on a remote website 83 (e.g., a video segment embedded into the remote website so that a viewer who visits the remote website sees the video segment as part of the page that is presented); as video commerce 84, for example a video that depicts a person describing his or her experience and training as part of a resume submitted on-line; or as a video

advertisement 85, for example a video depicting the benefits or showing the use of a product.

Many other like applications of the technology can be envisioned. In various embodiments, the video segment can be made available to the viewer as a streaming video that is sent to the viewer, or may be made available by sending the viewer a message such as an email that contains an address of a location to visit on the Web (e.g., a Universal Resource Locator, or URL), or may be made available by sending the viewer a message that contains an embedded link to a URL, for example by sending an e-mail containing the link or by sending a still image that may have some interest to a viewer (e.g., sending a grandmother a still image of her grandchildren) to which a link is attached (e.g., the still image is linked to a streaming video of the grandchildren that is delivered and that plays when the still image is clicked). In the latter two methods of making a video segment available, or in like methods, the viewer must take some action, such as employing the URL or activating the link. In some embodiments, the viewer can use a hand held device such as a PDA or a cellular telephone that can connect to a network such as the Internet to view the video segment.

FIG. 1B is a schematic diagram that shows a process and system for selecting and associating an advertisement to the video which is obtained, uploaded, and sent to a recipient as in FIG. 1A. In FIG. 1B, an exemplary advertiser 30 submits an advertisement to an advertisement database 63 which is part of the VideoShare host computer 60 of FIG. 1A, and which is accessible by the host computer 60. The advertisement can be a video clip, a still image, or an audio file, or it can be a combination of two or more of these formats. The advertisement is recorded in the advertisement database 63, which is a machine-readable medium. The submission of the advertisement by the advertiser 30 is depicted by the arrow 32.

There can be a plurality of advertisers 30 and each advertiser 30 can submit one or more advertisements for posting in advertisement database 63.

According to the principles of the present invention, when exemplary user (or sender of a video) 40 uploads a video, using the user's computer 10 (which can also be referred to as sender computer 10), to the host computer 60, the host computer 60, using software that operates on the host computer 60, offers the sender 40 an opportunity to indicate a selection of an advertisement of the one or more advertisements posted to advertisement database 63 to be associated with the video segment that sender 40 has uploaded to the host computer 60. The sender 40 can be shown all or part of one or more advertisements, which can be categorized by type (e.g., areas of interest such as consumer goods, travel, entertainment, household goods, financial products, business services, hobbies, recreation, and the like), which can be categorized by duration, and which can be categorized by an amount the advertiser is willing to pay a sender and/or a viewer. The advertisements can also be categorized in many other ways. In an alternative embodiment, the sender 40 can specify types of ads that he or she wants shown. In yet another embodiment, the host computer 60 (or the entity that controls it) can select which advertisement will preferentially be offered to the sender 40 as part of the group of advertisements that are available.

Bidirectional arrow 34 denotes a process in which the host computer 60 offers the opportunity to the sender 40 to experience various advertisements, using sender computer 10 and software that is present and operating on sender computer 10, and the sender 40 can respond, using sender computer 10 and its associated software, to the host computer 60 by selecting one or more advertisements for association with the video that the sender 40 has uploaded to host

computer 60. The sender 40 can transmit from the sender computer 10 an indication of an intent to send the video segment and the advertisement over the computer network to a recipient 92.

In response to receiving the indication, the host computer 60 and its associated server computer system 62, 62' automatically perform a series of actions. The actions include assuring
5 that the video segment is in a streaming video format, creating an identifier for the video segment, associating the video segment and the advertisement, and sending the video segment, the identifier, and the associated advertisement over the computer network to a receiving computer system, such as computer 90 of FIG. 2, where the recipient 92 can view the video segment and the associated advertisement. The video segment, with or without an associated advertisement, can also be referred to as a video message. The process of sending the video message to the recipient 92 is schematically denoted by the arrow 36 from the sender 40 to the recipient 92. The entire process will be described in further detail below.

In FIG. 2, the exemplary advertiser 30 sends an advertisement to the host computer 60, which includes servers 62, 62', advertisement database 63, and storage 64, from a computer 75 that is connected to host computer 60 by a computer network, as depicted by arrow 32. It is also possible for an advertiser to transmit an advertisement recorded in machine-readable form on any convenient machine-readable storage medium.

A machine-readable medium can be used to record any information that can be presented in digital format, including computer code, text, images, sounds and the like. The information can
20 include advertisements, videos, audio information or the like, or it can include computer instructions, data, or other matter useful in operating digital equipment. The information is typically recorded on the machine-readable medium as one or more symbols in a file. The

machine-readable medium can be, for example, a computer floppy disk, a computer hard drive, a magnetic tape or the like, a CD-ROM, computer memory such as static or dynamic RAM, ROM, PROM, EPROM or the like, and/or any other mechanism or medium for storing machine-readable files, instructions, data or software. In a network, the machine-readable medium can be physically attached to a computer different from one on which the data may be used, or the software may operate. For example, in a network, an archival copy of software can reside on one computer and a copy can be copied to another computer, where the copy is executed or otherwise used. If transfer time is not an issue, as when a viewer of a video puts off viewing to a later time, a file containing data or information (such as a video, a text file, a database file, a spreadsheet template or the like) may reside on the same computer as the one that received the file, or on a different computer that stores the file for the convenience of the viewer. These are only some examples of commonly available machine-readable media, and it will be apparent to those of ordinary skill in the computer arts, that many other kinds of machine-readable media can be used with equal effect. The advertisement that the advertiser 30 sends to the advertiser database 63 from the advertiser computer 75 can be created in any manner that can be used for making advertisements, for example, by having a professional advertisement agency oversee the making of one or more advertisements. The exact manner in which the advertisement is peripheral to the invention, but there are mechanisms by which one or more advertisements from one or more advertisers 30 come to be posted on the advertisement database 63. An advertiser can be charged a fee for posting and/or storing an advertisement, for associating the advertisement with the video segment, and for sending the video segment, the identifier, and the associated advertisement from the host computer 60 and its components to the receiver computer system 90 of a viewer 92.

Many different approaches to determining a price that an advertise will be charged are possible. Advertisers can be charged a premium price to get preferential placement on an advertisement selection page of the host computer 60. Prices for such preferential placement can be determined by an auction mechanism. Alternatively, the operator of the host computer 60 can attempt to match prices advertisers 30 are willing to pay for advertising with the remuneration that senders 40 and viewers 90 are prepared to accept.

Similarly, there are many ways that senders 40 and viewers 92 of advertisements may be induced to participate. Examples of possible schemes to remunerate senders 40 and viewers 92 can include paying a sender 40 a set price based on the number of times an advertisement is viewed, paying a sender 40 based on a scale that increases with volume of ad views, and paying a viewer 92 for viewing an advertisement. The payment can take the form of money, in-kind payments (e.g., free services), and other incentives, including special promotions based on the number of advertisements sent or viewed.

In FIG. 2, the computer 16 of the user's computer system 10 is shown. The box 18 is intended to schematically depict a user of a computer video input device, which device can be the computer 16 operating suitable software to generate digital video, or can be another such computer, or can be the web cam or video camera 12, or can be the video recording device 14, or the like. The video input device can be a Web camera, a personal computer, a laptop computer, a personal digital assistant or PDA, a video cassette recorder or VCR, a video camera, a movie camera, a video game console or any device that can be configured to upload video segments and images to the video server. The user begins by producing and/or recording a video segment on the hard disk of the computer 16 or within the temporary memory of a handheld device. As a

second step, the video segment of step 1 can optionally be compressed and /or can be changed as regards the computer file format in which it is recorded on the hard disk. This is depicted by arrows 11 and 13, between the steps of Produce/Record Video on the Hard Disk, and Possible Compression/Format Change to the Video.

5 As a third step, the video segment recorded on the hard drive of the computer 16 is transmitted with one or more identifiers to the host computer 60 that includes the VideoShare servers 62, 62' and the storage array 64. The video segment is stored under the control of the host computer 60, which can generate an identification tag that the host computer 60 can use to locate the stored video segment for retrieval and for viewing. A video segment can be uploaded to the video server over a network such as the Internet or by the use of wireless communication, or by a combination of both. The video server can include local or remote storage for storing the uploaded video images. A video segment can be accessed from the video server over a network such as the Internet or by the use of wireless communication, or by a combination of both.

10 In different embodiments, the identification tag can be provided to a user in the form of a URL, or can be embedded into a Web page on a remote site, or can be linked to a message. In one embodiment the message can be a still image that can be selected from the video segment. The third step is schematically depicted by the arrow 34a pointing generally from the computer 16 to the VideoShare servers 62, 62'.

15 A fourth step involves offering the sender 40 the opportunity to associate an advertisement with the uploaded video, as described before. This is represented by the arrows 20 34a and 34b, in a manner similar to that of FIG. 1B.

As a fifth step, the user who stored the video can send a message to an intended viewer, so that the viewer can access and view the video segment. The fifth step is schematically depicted by the arrow 17 pointing generally from the computer 16 to the computer 90 of the viewer. The box 92 is intended to schematically depict a user of a display device. In one embodiment, the display device can be the computer 90, or the display device can be a display device such as a Web TV, or can be a video output device such as a television set with a suitable decoder, or the like. The video output device can be any device that can be configured to allow a user to access and view the video segments and images including but not limited to a television, a computer, a PDA, a video camera, or a video game console. The display device can also be a wireless hand held device such as a PDA or a cellular telephone or the like.

In a fifth step, the viewer activates the viewing of the video segment. The viewer's action is indicated schematically by the arrow 19 pointing generally from the computer 90 to the server computer 62, 62'. In one embodiment the viewer activates a link by clicking a button, and the server computer 62, 62' responds by sending a streaming video segment that the viewer observe. The streaming video segment can in one embodiment be delivered as part of a video greeting card 81. In an alternative embodiment, the video can be delivered as a streaming video directly to the viewer from the host computer 60, without the viewer having to activate the host computer 60. The viewer 92 can, in different embodiments, take certain actions, as will be described below, in response to the video, its associated identifier, and the associated advertisement being send to the viewer 92. These actions will be addressed in more detail below.

As shown in FIG. 3A, the user can obtain a copy of the VideoShare Producer 20 software by downloading a copy of the software from the Website www.VideoShare.com 50, as indicated

by the picture at numeral 1. The term VideoShare Producer 20 software as used herein is intended to include the software that is required to interact with the host computer 60 to effectuate the necessary actions associated with dealing with advertisements. Alternatively, the user can obtain a copy of the VideoShare Producer 20 software on machine readable media such as a CD-ROM or the like. The VideoShare Producer 20 software can be bundled with one or more utility or application programs that are useful for a user to have, such as a "container" application so that the VideoShare Producer 20 software can be operated on a desktop computer. The user can install the VideoShare Producer 20 software on his or her computer 16 and can register with the VideoShare.com hosting service at no charge. In registering for the VideoShare service, the user obtains a username and a password that can be used to identify the user. The activity of installing the VideoShare Producer 20 software on the user's personal computer or the like and registering with the VideoShare system is indicated by the picture at the numeral 2.

In order to use the system, the user first obtains a video segment. The user can create the video segment, for example with a Web cam 12, or the user can use an existing video segment obtained from a video recorder 16, as indicated by the picture at the numeral 3. The VideoShare Producer 20 software has direct capture capabilities that permit the user to create the video segment.

The user can employ the VideoShare Producer 20 software to optionally compress the video; to determine if a video segment is in a format that is compatible with streaming video; to convert the video to a file format that is compatible with streaming video if the video segment is not already in a file format that is compatible with streaming video; and to transmit the video segment together with one or more identifiers that represent selections that the user can make (for

example, a still image selected from the series of images that comprise the video segment, an identifier of the sender of the video segment (e.g., the user), an access privilege associated with the video segment, information indicative of a time period during which the video segment will be accessible, and information indicative of a number of instances that the video segment may be accessed). The identifier is associated with the video segment. The activities carried out in conjunction with the VideoShare Producer 20 software are generally indicated by the graphic at numeral 4.

The video segment and the identifier(s) are transmitted to the host computer 60 for storage and for later distribution. In one embodiment, the video segment is transmitted in a streaming video file format. This transmission activity is denoted by the graphic at numeral 5.

The video segment is stored under the control of the host computer 60, which can include one or more server computers 62 and storage array 64. The activity of receiving the video segment at the host computer 60 and storing the video segment and its identifier(s) is denoted by the pictures at numeral 6.

Depending on the choice of the user as to access privileges, the video segment can be stored as a publicly available video in a location in storage array 64 that has no restrictions on access, or it can be stored in a portion of storage array 64 that requires some form of authorization to enable access, such as in a private email account area. The storage of the video segment as a public or private video segment is denoted by the pictures at numeral 7.

Upon request from a viewer who has the proper authorization, or upon any request in the case of a video segment available publicly, the host computer 60 sends the video in streaming video format to a viewer, who can observe the video in real time using a conventional web

browser without additional plug-in modules. The activity of serving the video segment as a streaming video is denoted by the graphic at numeral 8.

Additional features of the software, that specifically deal with the interactions the sender 40 carries out with the host computer 60 will be discussed in FIG. 3B and FIG. 3C.

5 FIG. 3B is another functional block and flow diagram of an embodiment of the invention, showing from the sender's perspective the steps in associating a video with an advertisement. At step 665(a), the sender 40 uses sender computer 10 to upload a video to host computer 60. At step 665(b), the sender 40 receives from host computer 60 an opportunity to select an advertisement from among those recorded or posted in advertisement database 63. At step 665(c), the sender 40 uses sender computer 10 to select one or more advertisements stored at the host computer 60, to be associated with the uploaded video. At step 665(d), the sender 40 uses sender computer 10 to indicate the user's selection to host computer 60. At step 665(e), the host computer 60 sends a video, its identifier, and one or more advertisements to a recipient 92 using receiver computer 90, based on indicated intention of sender 40.

15 FIG. 3C is another functional block and flow diagram of an embodiment of the invention, showing from the host computer's perspective the steps in associating a video with an advertisement. In step 665(a)', the host computer 60 receives a video upload from the sender 40 using sender computer 10. In step 665(b)', the host computer 60 offers the sender 40 an opportunity to select an advertisement via sender computer 10. In step 665(c)', the host computer 60 receives an indication from the sender 40 using sender computer 10 of the selection of one or more advertisements, to be associated with the uploaded video. In step 665(d)', the host computer 60 receives an indication from the sender 40 using sender computer 10 to send a

video, its identifier, and one or more advertisements to recipient 92. Optionally, step 665(d)' can be included in step 665(c)' by inference, or it can be explicitly performed. At step 665(e), the host computer 60 sends a video, its identifier, and one or more advertisements to a recipient 92 using receiver computer 90, based on indicated intention of sender 40.

5 FIG. 3B and FIG. 3C are identified as step 665 generally. Step 665 appears in each of FIG. 6A, FIG. 6B and FIG. 6C, where the one step is identified as "Select and associate advertisement." It is intended that FIG. 3B or FIG. 3C be referred to, as appropriate, in understanding that step 665 is in reality a series of substeps that involve both the sender 40 using his or her sender computer 10 and the host computer 60, both computers using software that is designed to support the necessary signaling and communication between the two computers. As those who are familiar with software will recognize, the software can equally well be replaced with firmware (e.g., software code committed to a memory such as a ROM or PROM or the like) or to hardware (e.g., circuitry designed to transmit and to accept signals that perform substantially the same functionality as the software). It is possible to use software, firmware and hardware in combination, or in substitution one for the other, to carry out such signaling and communication tasks. It is possible to program software using one or more different programming languages, with substantially the same effect.

The majority of the VideoShare Producer 20 software was developed as a Windows 95, Windows 98, and Windows 2000 ("Windows 9x/2000") compatible ActiveX control (e.g. an .OCX file), with additional components existing as active template library (ATL) component object model (COM) components that are instantiated during runtime. A "container application," named "VideoProducer.exe," allows the VideoShare Producer ActiveX Control to be executed

from the Windows 9x/2000 desktop. The VideoShare Producer Active X Control can also be embedded into a web page, as is done within the www.VideoShare.com 50 web site.

The custom written VideoShare Producer 20 software includes the following binary/source code components: (1) VideoShare Producer ActiveX Control (VideoProducer.ocx);
5 (2) JPEG ATL COM component (jpeg.dll); (3) Thumbnail Acquisition DirectShow (ThumbnailFilter.ax); (4) Extended MAPI interface (MapiExAPI.dll); (5) ICQ interface (icqglue.dll); AND (6) VideoShare Upload/Database Server (vpserver.exe).

All components, except for significant portions of the JPEG component that uses public domain source code, were entirely written by VideoShare Inc. The VideoShare Upload/Data
60 Server constantly runs at the VideoShare Hosting Facility, an embodiment of the host computer 60, with which an installed instance of the VideoShare Producer 20 software on a user's computer 16 can be in constant communication. The VideoShare Producer 20 software client/server structure allows the user to upload videos to his or her account through the "Save and Share" button that is described later.

65 The VideoShare Producer 20 software is built upon the following third-party technologies that provide lower-level device support, document sharing, and file format conversion: (1) Microsoft's DirectShow; (2) Microsoft's Windows Media Technologies; (3) Microsoft's Video for Windows; (4) MAPI; AND (5) ICQ.

20 When the user launches the VideoShare Producer 20 software, he or she will see the window depicted in FIG. 4 appear on his or her computer 16 operating the Win9x/2000 operating system. The login screen can be made optional for repeat users by providing a unique identifier for the user, such as a password, or by installing on the user's computer or the like a record

similar to the “cookies” used by some interactive computer systems operating on a network such as the Internet.

When the user enters in his or her username in the box 410 labeled VideoShare Login Name and his or her password in the box 415 labeled VideoShare Password and activates the “Start VideoShare Producer” button 420, the VideoShare Producer 20 software opens a TCP/IP socket connection to the VideoShare Upload/Database Server via port 80 in order to avoid typical Firewall and/or Proxy Server problems. If the box 430 labeled Remember password is checked, the VideoShare Producer 20 software will remember the user’s password, eliminating the necessity to type in that information each time the software is started. The VideoShare Upload/Database Server then verifies the validity of the username/password. Furthermore, the VideoShare Producer 20 software will notify the user if there is a more recent version of the software available, giving him or her the opportunity to automatically download and install the new software.

Also at this point, the user can choose to work offline by checking box 440 “Work offline”, which suspends communications to the VideoShare Upload/Database Server until the user has filled his or her “Sharing Queue” as described later. The ability to work offline is principally of use for people with computers that do not have a continuously open Internet connection, e.g. computers that use telephone modems rather than high speed connections or equipment such as cellular telephones or hand held devices that require the user to dial in to establish a connection. With this login dialog, the user can also receive help, by activating the “Help” button 450, taking the user to a web page on the VideoShare web site. The login dialog

box can also be used to create a new VideoShare user account, by clicking the “Create Another Account” button 460.

Once the login process has been completed, the VideoShare Producer 20 software looks for available DirectShow audio and video capture devices. These available devices are

5 enumerated and listed within the “Settings Tab” as described later. The VideoShare Producer 20 software initializes the audio and video capture device, by recalling as a default the device that was used most recently.

VideoShare Producer Preview/Capture/Import Process

After the capture device initialization, the VideoShare Producer 20 software displays the window depicted in FIG. 5.

10 The image 510 in the middle of the window is the video input stream from the initialized, default video capture source. The image in FIG. 5 is that of an employee of the assignee of the present invention, in the offices of the assignee. The VideoShare Producer 20 software automatically builds a DirectShow “preview graph” where the video stream from the video
15 device is displayed on the screen, but is not saved to disk. This gives the user the opportunity to adjust the camera, e.g. an opportunity to correct the camera position, the camera focus, the camera angle, the magnification of the image, and the like.

At the top of this window, the user is presented with five different “tabs”, each presenting the user with different aspects of the VideoShare Producer 20 software. In FIG. 5, the tab labeled
20 “Record/Playback” 520 is active, indicating that the VideoShare Producer 20 software is ready to acquire and/or display a video segment.

At the bottom of the window, there is a status message 522 that displays the current operation of the VideoShare Producer 20 software. In FIG. 5, the status message 522 prompts the user to either activate the Record button 531 to create a new video segment, or to import an existing video segment by activating the Import Video button 535, both of which are described in more detail below.

Directly below the video preview image 510 is a Capture/Playback Control Panel 530 that includes the following items:

- Record button 531 which begins a new audio/video capture;
- Stop button 532 which terminates an active audio/video capture operation;
- Play button 533 which initiates the playing back of the last recorded or imported video;
- Delete button 534 which cancels the last record or import operation and begins a new video preview;
- Import Video button 535 which allows the user to select a pre-existing video file from his or her hard drive;
- Save and Share button 536, which in the present embodiment activates software modules that convert the current video file into a compressed streaming format, upload that converted file to the VideoShare web site, and give the user options to distribute that video to other people; and
- Shuttle Bar 537 which is used to control the current position of the playback file together with forward button 537 and reverse button 538, allowing the user to rewind and fast forward through the current video.

The software modules that operate upon the activation of Save and Share button 536 will be covered in a subsequent section in this document in detail.

When the user begins to record a video, the VideoShare Producer 20 software builds a new "Capture Graph" that renders the video stream to both the display window as well as to a temporary .AVI file on the user's hard drive. The audio/video capturing continues until the user activates the "Stop" button 532 at which point the VideoShare Producer 20 software stops the "Capture Graph", destroys the DirectShow filter, builds a Direct Show "Playback Graph", and displays the first frame of the captured video as video preview image 510. When the user activates the Play button 533 the DirectShow "Playback Graph" is put into running mode, playing back the entire recorded video from beginning to end.

The user can also choose to import a pre-existing video, which in one embodiment can be a file format selected from the AVI, MPEG, or QuickTime file formats, by activating the Import Video button 535. The VideoShare Producer 20 software automatically renders the correct DirectShow filter to display an imported video correctly.

Save and Share Process

Once a video segment has been recorded or imported into the user's computer 16 that is running the VideoShare Producer 20 software, the user can choose to process the video segment with various optional alternatives by activating the Save and Share button 536. When the Save and Share button 536 is activated, the video segment is archived and distributed automatically.

The VideoShare Producer 20 software greatly simplifies the entire process by seamlessly automating the following steps that are depicted in FIG. 6A:

- Video file format conversion, as required;

- Compression to a streaming multimedia format at a user-specified bitrate;
- Creating a "Thumbnail" JPEG snapshot of the video file, as an identifier that a user or a viewer can observe in order to assess the content of the video segment;
- Transferring the resultant video and thumbnail files to the VideoShare server computers 62, 62';
- Logging the transactions and managing the user's storage account, including causing the generation of an identification tag that the server computers 62, 62' can employ to retrieve the video segment for viewing; and
- Automating several possible methods of distributing the video to third party recipients, e.g., viewers.

In addition, the user (or sender of the video) is given the opportunity to select an advertisement from one or more advertisements that have been posted on the VideoShare host computer 60 by advertisers who pay for such advertisements. The user or sender can decide, based on the sender's knowledge or opinion about the recipient of the video that the sender is sending, what kind of advertisement is appropriate. the sender can select the advertisement based on one or more criteria. For example, the sender may know an interest of the recipient and can use a criterion based on the recipient's interests, such as the type of product or service that the recipient may be interested in. The sender may know how willing the recipient is to watch an advertisement, and can select an advertisement based on the criterion of how long the advertisement is. The sender can select an advertisement based on a criterion of how much the advertiser is willing to pay the sender to attach the advertiser's advertisement rather than another advertisement. The sender may not have a preference, and can make a selection that leaves the

choice of an advertisement up to the VideoShare host computer 60. The VideoShare host computer 60 can select an advertisement on the basis of a random selection from all the advertisements available, or can make the selection based on other criteria, such as the price paid by the advertiser, an agreed frequency of presentation of an advertisement, or other criteria.

5 FIG. 6A shows a flow diagram 600 of an embodiment of the invention in which the VideoShare Producer 20 software automates a number of steps in connection with uploading a video segment by activation of the Save and Share button 536 described in FIG. 5. As indicated at box 605, a user first obtains and selects a video segment for processing for distribution. The box 605 schematically encapsulates all of the actions that a user takes as described in relation to FIGs. 4 and 5 above. When the user activates the Save and Share button 536 the actions described below that are enclosed by the dotted line 607 are automatically carried out under the control of the VideoShare Producer 20 software.

 The VideoShare Producer 20 software subjects the selected video segment to analysis to determine whether the selected video segment is or is not in a file format that is compatible with a streaming video format, as indicated at diamond 610. Formats that are compatible with streaming media formats include formats such as MPEGs and QuickTime videos. If the selected video segment is not compatible with a streaming video format, it is converted to a compatible format, as depicted by the arrow labeled "NO" that points from the diamond 610 to the box 615, "Convert to compatible file format." The conversion process performed by the VideoShare
20 Producer 20 software creates a DirectShow filter graph that decompresses the video file into a temporary, uncompressed AVI file.

The video segment file in a format that is compatible with streaming video is then temporarily stored in the user's computer 16, for example as a file on the hard drive of computer 16. This storing step is performed if the file was originally in a format compatible with streaming video by following the arrow marked "YES" that points from the diamond 610 to the box 620, "Temporarily store file." Alternatively, the storing step is performed if the file was originally not in a format compatible with streaming video by following the arrow that points from the box 615 to the box 620.

The apparatus and method of the invention can include compression techniques to manage large video segments and image files. Video segments and image files can be compressed by the video sender before being uploaded to the server or can be compressed by the server itself. Compression can be used to improve the efficiency of transmission and to improve the use of storage.

The stored temporary file representing the selected video is then analyzed by the VideoShare Producer 20 software, as represented by diamond 625, "Should file be compressed?" to determine if the temporarily stored file should be compressed. If the software determines that the file should be compressed, as indicated by the arrow labeled "YES" that points from the diamond 625 to the box 630, labeled "Compress file," the file is compressed. The compression involves compressing the video file to a user-specified bitrate, or the bandwidth that is required to view the video without disruption in the transmission. The user can select the desired bitrate via the "Settings Tab" that is described in more detail below.

The file is then converted to a streaming multimedia format file as indicated by the box 635, labeled "Convert file to streaming multimedia format ("SMF") file," as denoted by the

arrow pointing from the box 630 to the box 635. If the file is not to be compressed, the flow follows the arrow labeled "NO" pointing from the diamond 625 to the box 635, and the file is then converted to a streaming multimedia format file as schematically represented by the box 635.

5 The process that is performed by the VideoShare Producer 20 software as denoted by the box 635 involves reading in the video file, frame by frame, and converting the video into a streaming multimedia format. In one embodiment, the VideoShare Producer 20 software uses the Windows Media Streaming Format, known as ASF or WMF, but it is not technologically restricted to this choice. The Windows Media Streaming Format comprises MPEG 4 v3 for the video stream and the Windows Media Audio format for the audio stream. The output of this file is stored as a temporary file on the user's hard drive, in one embodiment.

20 The flow diagram indicates that the process makes a "thumbnail" of the video file, as represented schematically by the box 640, labeled "Create and temporarily store JPEG "thumbnail" identifier." The VideoShare Producer 20 software produces a JPEG still image that is used as a reference image to the entire video file. It is an identifier of the subject matter or content of the video that a user or a viewer can readily recognize, as compared to an alphanumeric string such as a typical string used to identify a file by its drive, directory (and one or more subdirectories) and filename. Such alphanumeric identifiers are useful, but may be totally uninformative as to the content or subject matter contained in the identified file or video segment. In one embodiment, the VideoShare Producer 20 software creates the "thumbnail" by taking the "middle" image of the entire video file, as measured by the temporal duration of the file. In another embodiment, the selection of an image from which to make the "thumbnail" can

be left to the discretion of the user. This JPEG file is also stored as a temporary file on the user's hard drive, in one embodiment.

The next part of the process is the upload operation, in which the VideoShare Producer 20 software contacts the host computer 60, which in one embodiment is the VideoShare

5 Upload/Database Server at the VideoShare hosting facility. This portion of the automated process is denoted by the box 645 labeled "Transfer ("upload") temporarily stored SMF file and JPEG thumbnail identifier to host computer 60." The VideoShare Producer 20 software notifies the host computer 60 that the user wishes to place his or her video into a repository maintained by the host computer 60, which in one embodiment can be the VideoShare VideoCenter, which is a repository of all recorded and uploaded videos to date. This upload is performed automatically via a direct TCP/IP socket connection over a specific connection port of the user's computer known as port 80. The VideoShare Producer 20 software uses a standard communications protocol to perform this transfer to the host computer 60. In another embodiment, a proprietary protocol can be used, for example if one wants to maintain the security of information contained in the video segment. In another embodiment, the video segment can be encrypted in order to provide enhanced security. Both the compressed video streaming multimedia file and the thumbnail image are uploaded at substantially the same time.

As schematically depicted by box 650, labeled "Delete temporary file to conserve storage space on user's computer," the VideoShare Producer 20 software removes all of the temporary
20 files that were created in the course of the automated processing described above. This feature provides for the user a convenient, secure, and transparent process, with the benefit that the

user's computer storage device(s), for example one or more hard drives, do not become cluttered with unnecessary and obsolete files.

Once the upload has been completed, the VideoShare Producer 20 software and the host computer 60 (for example, the VideoShare Upload/Database Server) will update the user's account to account for the required storage space that the video requires. The necessary logging, creation of an identification tag, and storing of the video and the associated identifier or identifiers is also performed automatically, as schematically depicted by box 655.

The user can optionally add additional identification and control information about the user, and about how and under what conditions the video is to be made available for distribution, as schematically indicated by box 660. The process by which some of this information is collected is discussed below with regard to FIG. 8. The user is automatically prompted to provide this information, but has the option to forego making a decision immediately.

The user is given an opportunity to select an advertisement that will be associated with the video, as schematically indicated by box 665, and as discussed in more detail below.

The transmission of video segment files to viewers is discussed in more detail below, and is represented in FIG. 6 by the box 670 labeled "Transmit file to viewer" which is outside the region 607 as an indication that the transmission of files to viewers is an action beyond the material discussed above in conjunction with the Save and Share button 536 of FIG. 5.

FIG. 6B shows a flow diagram 601 of another embodiment of the invention in which software automates a number of steps in connection with uploading a video segment. Many of the steps already described in connection with FIG. 6A also occur in the embodiment depicted in FIG. 6B, and are numbered in the same manner as in FIG. 6A. In FIG. 6B, there is first an

optional step indicated by the box 604 labeled "Optional: User authentication with server" in which the User is optionally required to provide identification, such as a user name and password, that authenticates the identity of the user to the server or host computer 60. The user then obtains and selects a video segment for processing for distribution, as indicated at box 605
5 that schematically encapsulates all of the actions that a user takes as described in relation to FIGs. 4 and 5 above. When the user activates the Save and Share button 536 the actions described below that are enclosed by the dotted line 608 are automatically carried out under the control of the VideoShare Producer 20 software.

As discussed in relation to FIG. 6A, the VideoShare Producer 20 software subjects the selected video segment to analysis to determine whether the selected video segment is or is not in a file format that is compatible with a streaming video format, as indicated at diamond 610. If the selected video segment is not compatible with a streaming video format, it is converted to a compatible format, as depicted by the arrow labeled "NO" that points from the diamond 610 to the box 615, "Convert to compatible file format." The conversion process performed by the VideoShare Producer 20 software creates a DirectShow filter graph that decompresses the video file into a temporary, uncompressed AVI file.

The video segment file in a format that is compatible with streaming video is then temporarily stored in the user's computer 16, for example as a file on the hard drive of computer 16. This storing step is performed if the file was originally in a format compatible with
20 streaming video by following the arrow marked "YES" that points from the diamond 610 to the box 620, "Temporarily store file." Alternatively, the storing step is performed if the file was

originally not in a format compatible with streaming video by following the arrow that points from the box 615 to the box 620.

The stored temporary file representing the selected video is then analyzed by the VideoShare Producer 20 software, and optionally compressed as represented by the box 623 labeled "Optional compression of file." The file is then converted to a streaming multimedia format file as indicated by the box 635, labeled "Convert file to streaming multimedia format ("SMF") file." Alternatively, a file from the box 620 can be uploaded to the host computer 60 without being converted to a streaming format, and the conversion to a streaming video format can be accomplished at the host computer 60. The process that is performed by the VideoShare Producer 20 software as denoted by the box 635 involves reading in the video file, frame by frame, and converting the video into a streaming multimedia format.

The flow diagram indicates that the process makes a "thumbnail" of the video file, as represented schematically by the box 640, labeled "Create and temporarily store JPEG "thumbnail" identifier."

The next part of the process is the upload operation, in which the VideoShare Producer 20 software contacts the host computer 60, which in one embodiment is the VideoShare Upload/Database Server at the VideoShare hosting facility. This portion of the automated process is denoted by the box 645 labeled "Transfer ("upload") temporarily stored SMF file and JPEG thumbnail identifier to host computer 60." Both the compressed video streaming multimedia file and the thumbnail image are uploaded at substantially the same time.

As schematically depicted by box 650, labeled "Delete temporary file to conserve storage space on user's computer," the VideoShare Producer 20 software removes all of the temporary

files that were created in the course of the automated processing described above. This feature provides for the user a convenient, secure, and transparent process, with the benefit that the user's computer storage device(s), for example one or more hard drives, do not become cluttered with unnecessary and obsolete files.

5 Once the upload has been completed, the VideoShare Producer 20 software and the host computer 60 (for example, the VideoShare Upload/Database Server) will update the user's account to account for the required storage space that the video requires. The necessary logging, creation of an identification tag, and storing of the video and the associated identifier or identifiers is also performed automatically, as schematically depicted by box 655.

0050 The user can optionally add additional identification and control information about the user, and about how and under what conditions the video is to be made available for distribution, as schematically indicated by box 660. The process by which some of this information is collected is discussed below with regard to FIG. 8. The user is automatically prompted to provide this information, but has the option to forego making a decision immediately.

0055 The user is given an opportunity to select an advertisement that will be associated with the video, as schematically indicated by box 665, and as discussed in more detail below.

 The transmission of video segment files to viewers is discussed in more detail below, and is represented in FIG. 6B by the box 670 labeled "Transmit file to viewer" which is outside the region 608 as an indication that the transmission of files to viewers is an action beyond the

20 material discussed above in conjunction with the Save and Share button 536 of FIG. 5.

 FIG. 6C shows a flow diagram 602 of an embodiment of the invention in which software automates a number of steps in the formatting of a video segment. In particular, in this

embodiment, the video segment that the user wishes to provide in streaming video format is compressed into a plurality of formats, each of which is encoded for optimal display at a different transmission bitrate. There can be a benefit to recording the same video segment in multiple formats. For example, a casual viewer may have only a slow speed modem, such as a 28.8 kilobaud (kB) modem. For such a viewer, the slow transmission speed can make the size of a file a critical feature. Such a user can view a video in real time if it is formatted for a 28.8 kB modem, but not if it is formatted for appreciably higher transmission speeds. Another user, for example, one who has a T1 connection that can handle transmission speeds up to approximately 1.5 megabaud, could successfully receive a version of the same video segment that is formatted for higher transmission speeds, with the possibility of having a better quality image and higher resolution, perhaps with better audio as well. The T1 user could see the version of the video segment intended for 28.8 kB transmission if he or she wanted to, but might prefer to see a video segment that appeared to be more professional in quality. By using a system that can automatically discriminate the transmission speed capabilities of the hardware that the user employs, the embodiment allows each user to view a version of the video segment that is optimally configured for the user's hardware.

In particular, the steps of the method enclosed within the dotted rectangle 609 are automated by software that embodies the present invention. As described above, the user obtains and selects a video segment for processing for distribution, as indicated at box 605 that schematically encapsulates all of the actions that a user takes as described in relation to FIGs. 4 and 5 above. When the user activates the Save and Share button 536 the actions described below

that are enclosed by the dotted line 609 are automatically carried out under the control of the VideoShare Producer 20 software.

As discussed in relation to FIG. 6A, the VideoShare Producer 20 software subjects the selected video segment to analysis to determine whether the selected video segment is or is not in a file format that is compatible with a streaming video format, as indicated at diamond 610. If the selected video segment is not compatible with a streaming video format, it is converted to a compatible format, as depicted by the arrow labeled "NO" that points from the diamond 610 to the box 615, "Convert to compatible file format." The conversion process performed by the VideoShare Producer 20 software creates a DirectShow filter graph that decompresses the video file into a temporary, uncompressed AVI file.

The video segment file in a format that is compatible with streaming video is then temporarily stored in the user's computer 16, for example as a file on the hard drive of computer 16. This storing step is performed if the file was originally in a format compatible with streaming video by following the arrow marked "YES" that points from the diamond 610 to the box 620, "Temporarily store file." Alternatively, the storing step is performed if the file was originally not in a format compatible with streaming video by following the arrow that points from the box 615 to the box 620.

The temporarily stored file is then compressed in multiple streaming multimedia formats, as denoted by the box 633. In the present example, three files will be used to describe the process, but it should be understood that more or fewer than three formats may be created at substantially the same time. The resulting multiple files are denoted by the three boxes 634, 636 and 638 labeled "Bandwidth Target A," "Bandwidth Target B," and "Bandwidth Target C,"

respectively. Each file is optimally encoded for play as a streaming video segment at a particular transmission rate and bandwidth, such as 28.8 kB, 56 kB, 100kB, 300kB, or other transmission rates.

As described above, the method includes a step of creating and temporarily storing a
5 “thumbnail” identifier, as denoted by the box 640. Rather than transmitting one video segment in one SMF with one thumbnail, the embodiment of FIG. 6C transmits all the files 634, 636 and 638 in association with the single thumbnail and any other identifiers that are selected as appropriate. For example, each SMF file can be identified as to its bandwidth. In an alternative embodiment, the system transmits only a single SMF file with its associated identifiers, including the JPEG “thumbnail,” and the multiple bandwidth variants of the SMF file are generated at the
10 host computer 60. This embodiment may be advantageous when the user has only a slow speed modem, and would be severely time constrained by having to upload multiple files.

The remaining steps of this embodiment, as denoted by the boxes 650, 655, 660, 665 and 670, correspond substantially to the steps in FIG. 6A represented by the boxes identified with the
15 corresponding numerals. It should be noted that the precise order of some of the steps, for example, the step denoted by the box 655 and the step denoted by the box 650, can be interchanged without a different outcome of the overall process. Other such interchanges in sequence are possible as well, again without a different outcome of the overall process.

FIG. 6D depicts an embodiment of the database 64 of the host computer 60 on which are
20 recorded the three exemplary bandwidth target files 634, 636 and 638 for FIG. 6C. These files are available for delivery over a computer network to a viewer. The files 634, 636 and 638 represent three versions of the same video segment in streaming multimedia format, each suitable

for optimal viewing by a user having hardware operating at the transmission rate corresponding to the format of one of the files.

As shown in FIG. 6E, the user (or the viewer) transmits to the host computer 60 a request for a particular video segment, denoted by the arrow from the box labeled "USER" to the box 960 labeled "Connection Speed Detector." Host computer 60 can include hardware that can sense the transmission speed of a user computer 16, or of a computer used by a person desiring to view a video segment. Alternatively, the host computer 60 can inquire of the computer on the network that is connected to the user computer 16 or the computer of a viewer about the speed of connection that is being maintained. When the information is available to the host computer 60, the host computer 60 can determine which file of the files exemplified by 634, 636 and 638 is most appropriate to serve to the user or viewer, as denoted by the box 692 labeled "Logic to select and serve SMF file to User." The host computer 60 then transmits the appropriate file to the user, as denoted by the arrow from the box 692 to the box 694 labeled "User receives and views SMF file." Alternatively, the viewer can request the transmission of a file encoded at a specific bitrate.

When the user begins the process described in relation to FIG. 6A, in one embodiment, the "Progress Dialog" screen 700 depicted in FIG. 7 is presented, reflecting the status of the process in real time. The "Progress Dialog" screen 700 notifies the user about the total number of bytes that have to be uploaded to perform the transfer and it also informs the user of the number of bytes and the percentage of the file that have been uploaded in real time.

FIG. 8 depicts a dialog panel 800 presenting several methods with which the user can distribute the uploaded streaming video segment and its associated identifiers to third party

recipients. The dialog panel 800 prompts the user as to the possible selections that the user can elect.

In one embodiment, there are five possible methods to distribute the video file:

The user can elect to use an email browser to send an email to one or more people that includes a URL reference to the video located on the VideoShare web site. This also includes the further possibility to send the video player directly embedded inside the email message. This option is elected by activating the button 810, labeled "Share as a video mail."

The user can elect to share the video as a greeting card, bringing the user to the Video Greeting Card web page at the VideoShare web site. In this case, the user will also select features relating to the greeting card. The user can elect this option by activating the button 820, labeled "Share as a video greeting card."

The user can elect to send an ICQ URL message, automatically interfacing with ICQ's Instant Messenger software. The user can elect this option by activating the button 830 labeled "Share through ICQ Messaging."

The user can elect to go to the user's VideoCenter page on the VideoShare web site, from which location the video can also be shared or sent to others. The user can elect this option by activating the button 840, labeled "Take me to my VideoCenter."

The user can elect to place HTML code in the user's clipboard that references the video. This HTML code can be "pasted" into any Web page that supports HTML inserts. The user can elect this option by activating the button 850, labeled "Put HTML code in my clipboard." In one embodiment, this option allows a user to paste a video into a Web page, for example to

demonstrate the use of a product for sale, or to present a personal greeting to visitors to the Web page.

By electing to activate the button 860, labeled "Nothing, I'll share this video later," the user can postpone making an election regarding the sharing of the uploaded video segment.

5 The above options are discussed in more detail below.

Sharing the video via email will bring up the user's default email browser, such as Outlook, Netscape Communicator, Eudora, etc. This is accomplished through the use of MAPI technologies that allow for document exchange on Win9x/2000 systems. A user who employs Netscape Communicator or Microsoft Outlook will be able to directly embed the Windows Media Player inside the email text body, allowing the recipient to directly play the video from his or her email browser. In one embodiment, this "embedded video mail" feature causes a window such as that depicted in FIG. 9 to appear, for example when the user is using Microsoft Outlook for e-mail service.

As shown in FIG. 9, at the top of the email message, the VideoShare Producer 20 software will display the Windows Media Player 910 with the sender's recorded video pre-loaded. The recipient of this embedded video mail only needs to activate the play button 920 on the Windows Media Player to see the video segment, rather than going to a URL hyper-link. The embodiment includes the conventional dialog boxes for entry of an email address for a recipient (box 902), a "carbon copy" ("cc") address (box 904), and a subject (box 906). In the
20 embodiment shown, instructions are presented below the Windows Media Player 910 for the convenience of the recipient.

The two options "Share as a Video Greeting Card" and "Take me to my VideoCenter" causes the VideoShare Producer 20 software to spawn off a Web browser and automatically jump to one of these two pages on the VideoShare Web site. The user can define the features of a video greeting card, and can direct the card as an e-mail to a viewer. Alternatively, the user can define a recipient list for the video segment as a single item to be viewed, and can send the video to the locations on the list.

The "Share Through ICQ Messaging" button 830 can bring up ICQ's Instant Messenger software, if it is installed on the user's machine, and can initiate a "URL Message" construction automatically. The VideoShare Producer 20 software can automatically fill out the URL that references the playback of the user's video. The recipient of this URL Message can view the video by clicking a mouse on the URL to be taken directly to the VideoShare web site, where the video can be displayed.

The "Put HTML code in my clipboard" button 850 can place a section of HTML code that, when the user pastes this code in a web page, causes the Windows Media Player to automatically instantiate a video playback of the message. This feature enables the user to place this video in any system that supports HTML code, such as personal web pages, online auction sites, online job boards, and the like.

Working Offline and the "Sharing Queue"

The VideoShare Producer 20 software also allows the user to "work offline." Offline means that the VideoShare Producer 20 software will not communicate with the host computer (for example, the VideoShare Upload/Database Server) until the user explicitly uploads one-or-more videos via a "Sharing Queue". This Sharing Queue appears to the user as one of the

main tabs in the VideoShare Producer 20 software and acts as a temporary queue for recorded/imported videos. "Work offline" allows the user to not make an Internet connection until he or she is ready to upload more than one video at a time. This mode of operation is useful for modem users who incur considerable expense for extended dial-in times or people who are using laptops and are not always near an Internet connection outlet.

FIG. 10 shows a screen 1000 used to control the status of a video queue. When the user, after recording or importing a video, clicks the "Save and Share" button 536 of FIG. 5 while in "offline mode", the VideoShare Producer 20 software performs the first three steps of the "Save and Share Process," namely, the video file format conversion represented by box 615 of FIG. 6A, the compression of the video segment to a streaming multimedia format at a user-specified bitrate represented by the box 635 of FIG. 6A, and the creation of a "Thumbnail" JPEG snapshot of the video file represented by the box 640 of FIG. 6A. The resulting output files are stored in a local database for later use in the "Sharing Queue," which is an operation similar to the temporary storage of files depicted in FIG. 6A. In the middle of FIG. 10 is a dialog box 1010 that displays a list of video segments that are ready to be uploaded to the VideoShare Web site. The small "Preview" window 1020 in the upper left corner of FIG. 10 is a DirectShow playback graph that allows the user to review the stored video segment that is highlighted in the dialog box 1010. The user can use this window to preview the video segment file by activating the "Preview" button 1030, to delete the video segment file by activating the "Delete" button 1040, and to upload and publish the video by activating the "Save and Share Now" button 1050.

The "Save and Share Now" button 1050 performs the uploading process on each of the queued videos, creating a TCP/IP connection to the VideoShare Upload/Database Server,

transferring the file to the VideoShare web site, and updating the user's VideoShare account, in a manner substantially similar to the method employed by the Save and Share button 536 of FIG. 5 to accomplish the same activities.

Audio/Video Setting Process

5 FIG. 11 shows a screen 1100 used to control the operational settings of equipment connected to the user's computer. Another feature of the VideoShare Producer 20 software the ability of the user to change the configuration of the audio, video, and compression devices through the use of the "Settings" tab 1110. Upon activation of the Settings tab 1110, the screen 1100 is active.

10 The user can select the "bitrate" at which the streaming multimedia files will be compressed by using the set of radio buttons 1120 at the upper left corner of the screen 1100. The default setting is "56k Modem" which corresponds to a user using a 56k modem. This default setting is denoted by the 56k Modem radio button 1120 appearing with a dot, while the remaining radio buttons for bitrate 1120 are blank. In one embodiment, the pie graph 1130 that appears at the upper right corner of screen 1100 indicates the percentage of the user's VideoShare storage space that is full. In the embodiment shown, the user has filled approximately 3.13% of the available storage capacity available for storing files. Two pull-down menus, "Camera source device" box 1140 and "Audio source device" box 1150, list all of the available video and audio capture sources that the user has available on his or her Win9x/2000 machine. The user can
20 select a source of audio or video by activating the appropriate pull-down menu box and locating a device of his or her choosing. To the right of these pull-down menus, there are two buttons, "Video Settings..." 1160 and "Audio Settings..." 1170 that allow the user to change the

properties of the currently selected audio and video device. Such properties include image size, capture compression, lighting conditions, and the like. The screen 1100 also provides to the user the current working directory information in a the box 1180 and the current queue directory information in the box 1190, which the user can optionally change by entering new values in
5 either or both boxes 1180 and 1190.

Interactive Advertisement Feature

Advertisers want to know how effective their advertisements are, and what response they are receiving from viewers. In normal commercial advertising in print media and in broadcast media, it is both difficult and expensive to try to gather such information. The interactive advertisement feature of the invention allows advertisers 30 to accurately track not only whether the ad video was watched by the viewer 92, but to do so in real time. In addition, there is no need to have individuals contact viewers 92 because systems and methods according to the invention perform the function in an automated manner.

Systems and methods of the invention operate by pausing the ad and/or the video until a specific action is taken by the viewer 92. The action that the viewer 92 can be required to take can include clicking a button, activating a mouse or pointing device, using the mouse or pointing device to activate a link, answering a question, or striking a key (or a similar action) to take place within a time frame.

20 Once the specific action has been taken, the video or the advertisement will resume playing.

If the action is not taken, the ad can either time out and not play for that viewer 92, remain paused until the viewer 92 either takes the action or closes the ad, or continue playing to its end. By observing the responses of viewers, it is possible to obtain statistics about how many of the ad videos were watched in their entirety and how many timed out or were never fully
5 viewed.

The benefits to advertisers 30 can include obtaining information about which of their advertisements were actually watched by the viewer 92. Advertisers can use such information to determine who is watching their advertisements, and how long those people watch a given advertisement.

While the invention has been particularly shown and described with reference to
particular embodiments, it should be understood by those skilled in the art that various changes
in form and detail may be made without departing from the spirit and scope of the invention as
defined by the appended claims.

What is claimed is: